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# Applying situational leadership in Australia

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**Abstract** Situational leadership (SL) remains highly popular among practitioners, despite considerable academic criticism, lack of theoretical debate, and relatively little published research into SL. We interviewed practicing managers trained in SL about their experiences in applying the model. SL appealed to the managers because of its intuitive simplicity, ease of use, and perceived relevance to managerial roles. SL can be applied consciously (with deliberation) or automatically. Contrary to expectations, practitioners did not report difficulty in assessing follower developmental levels. While respondents were aware that they needed to use all four SL styles in managing their people, consistent with previous research, these Australian managers preferred using supportive styles, and some went to considerable lengths to avoid being directive. The intercultural applicability of SL is questioned, and directions for further research into some of the hypotheses generated by this study are proposed.

## Introduction

One of the most popular management models among practicing managers, situational leadership (SL), was originally published by Hersey and Blanchard (1969, 1982, 1988, 1996) as the “Life-cycle theory of leadership”. Hersey and Blanchard intended the life-cycle theory to assist parents in changing their “leadership” styles as children progressed through infancy, adolescence, and adulthood. Similar logic was applied to managing new, developing and experienced employees in the workplace, and in 1972, the term “situational leadership” was introduced (Hersey and Blanchard, 1996). SL was innovative in the predominantly command-and-control, hierarchical management culture of the 1970s with its new emphasis on followers, and on leaders using different styles depending on the situation. As Hersey and Blanchard (1996) point out, in today’s workplace leadership tends to be done with people, rather than to people.

Since 1973, Hersey and Blanchard have taken different stands on SL, claiming that this is primarily a labelling difference (Hersey and Blanchard, 1996). This paper adopts terminology from Blanchard’s latest version, SLII (Blanchard *et al.*, 1985), mainly because the researchers were provided with access to managers trained in SLII.

The essential *modus operandi* of the Hersey and Blanchard models is similar, in that SL is based on the interplay between the leader’s guidance or



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direction and socio-emotional support, and the readiness or developmental level that followers exhibit on a particular task, function, or objective (Hersey and Blanchard, 1988). In SLII, four sets of management behaviors result from combining high and low supporting (such as listening, providing feedback and encouraging) with high and low directing (“task-related behaviors” like demonstrating, instructing and monitoring). The four resulting styles are:

- (S1) directing (high directing, low supporting);
- (S2) coaching (high directing, high supporting);
- (S3) supporting (low directing, high supporting); and
- (S4) delegating (low directing, low supporting).

Effective SL managers provide individual followers with differing amounts of direction and support on different tasks and goals, depending on the follower’s developmental level (Blanchard *et al.*, 1993). For example, on a task new to a given employee, the manager is advised to begin with more directive, and less supportive, behavior (S1). A manager should start with a (normally subjective) assessment of the follower’s developmental level on a particular activity (Blanchard and Nelson, 1997). Developmental level refers to the “extent to which a person has mastered the skills necessary for the task at hand and has developed a positive attitude toward the task” (Blanchard *et al.*, 1993, p. 27), and is based on multiple dimensions of a person’s competence and commitment (Blanchard *et al.*, 1993). Competence refers to knowledge and skills, and commitment refers to the follower’s motivation and confidence on that task.

The model recommends that the manager’s style should change with corresponding changes in the follower’s competence and commitment. SLII prescribes that the appropriate manager styles of S1 (directing) to S4 (delegating) correspond to particular follower developmental levels, termed D1 to D4 respectively (Blanchard *et al.*, 1985). The four SLII developmental levels are (Blanchard *et al.*, 1993; Blanchard and Nelson, 1997):

- (D1) enthusiastic beginner, low on competence and high on commitment;
- (D2) disillusioned learner with increasing competence and low commitment;
- (D3) capable but cautious contributor, with moderate to high competence and variable commitment; and
- (D4) self-reliant achiever who is high on both competence and commitment.

The relationship between leader behavior and follower developmental level is posited as curvilinear rather than linear (Hersey and Blanchard, 1982), a relationship which Blanchard terms the “performance curve” (Blanchard *et al.*, 1985).

Both the current Hersey and Blanchard models display conceptual differences in addition to their terminological differences. For example, in the original joint model, followers were assumed to be unmotivated on a new task and to gain willingness as they began to develop on that task. Blanchard’s SLII

proposes the opposite, that D1 followers start high on commitment (motivation) and low on competence, but become somewhat discouraged and unmotivated at D2 (Blanchard *et al.*, 1993).

*Academic and practitioners' views*

Overall, SL models have been criticized by researchers and academics for having very few theoretical bases and little research support (Nahavandi, 1997). For example, Blanchard's more recent publications do not clarify the relationship underlying the performance curve, despite its being central to SL theory, leading Graeff (1997) to question the extent to which the nature of this relationship has ever been satisfactorily demonstrated. Another puzzling aspect of SL models is that combining high/low directive and supportive behaviors with high/low competence and commitment of the developmental levels, yields 16 possible combinations. Yet the Hersey and Blanchard SL models are restricted to only four of these possibilities.

Testing differences between the Hersey and Blanchard models is made difficult because terms such as development level, commitment, and competence have not been operationally defined sufficiently to allow rigorous research into the models (Graeff, 1983, 1997). It is also difficult to compare research outcomes because the instruments measuring SL styles and effectiveness have changed over the years, generating confusion among both researchers and practitioners (Nicholls, 1985, 1986; Vecchio, 1987; Cairns *et al.*, 1998; Yukl, 1998).

Despite Blanchard's references to over 50 masters theses and research papers on SLII and its measuring instruments (Blanchard *et al.*, 1993), Goodson *et al.* (1989) point out with justifiable concern that SL appears not to have been researched to the extent warranted by the fact that more than three million people have attended SL training courses (Blanchard and Nelson, 1997). Since few results have been published in the literature, there is no consensus on how much empirical research has been completed on SL (Blank *et al.*, 1990).

These strong criticisms and the frequent neglect of SL among academic scholars contrast with SL's apparent popularity among practitioners (Blanchard and Nelson, 1997), suggesting that practitioners and academics may evaluate SL using different criteria. For many practicing managers, what "works" and has face validity appears important, irrespective of any academic concerns. Therefore, despite shortcomings in SL models from a theoretical point of view, this paper focuses on practitioners' perspectives in applying the model. Given the US origin of SL, it also seems appropriate to investigate its applicability in a different culture, and in this paper, the focus is on Australian managers' experiences.

**Expectations**

Given the paucity of research into SL, this study was primarily exploratory and not driven by prior expectations, except for the following:

- *Unconscious/conscious use.* It is well known that familiar and routine tasks require less conscious attention than unfamiliar tasks, and that experts and novices differ in how much attention they need to apply to a task (e.g. Schneider and Shiffrin, 1977; Shiffrin and Schneider, 1977). Therefore, we expected that respondents' experience with SL could affect the amount of conscious attention devoted to applying SL and/or particular SL styles.
- *Preferences for supportive styles.* Previous research has found that Australian managers untrained in SL demonstrate clear preferences for using the more supportive S3 (supporting) and S2 (coaching) styles, with S3 predominant for senior/middle managers (Avery and Keighley, 1998, 1999, 2000). We expected that training in SL would reduce preferences for supportive styles.
- *Avoiding being directive.* Previous research found that Australian managers avoided being directive, with the least preferred SLII style being S1 (directing), followed by S4 (delegating) (Avery and Keighley, 1998, 1999, 2000). Given the forced-choice nature of the SLII measuring instruments, some styles must be less prevalent when strong preferences are exhibited, and previous research leads us to expect S1 (directing) to be the most avoided style.
- *Flexibility.* Flexibility refers to the capacity to use more than one style (Zigarmi and Zigarmi, 1990, 1991). Previous research has shown that, despite exhibiting preferred SL styles, Australian managers are flexible to varying degrees (Avery, 2001). We expected that managers trained in SL would be aware of being flexible, and would attempt to use all styles.
- *Diagnosing is difficult.* Given the poorly-operationalized concepts of developmental level, commitment and competence, and the need for more research into these concepts (Blanchard *et al.*, 1993), managers could experience difficulty determining a follower's developmental level. Assessing competency refers to judging a person's knowledge and ability in relation to a specific task, and whether that ability is transferable to comparable tasks. Commitment refers to a person's motivation (to get on and do a job) and that person's confidence when performing a task unsupervised. Commitment and competence interact, so that some people could be motivated but lack confidence in their ability to do a task, and vice versa. Thus, subjectively assessing development level could be challenging.

## Methodology

### *Sample*

A total of 17 managers trained in SLII, who claimed to apply the model in their workplace, were interviewed. The SLII licensee for Australia referred the researchers to organizations that had participated in corporate SLII training programs. The human resources (HR) departments in turn provided lists of

employees who fulfilled the criteria of: having attended an SLII training course within the past 2-36 months, having received 360-degree SLII feedback, and claiming to apply SL at work. The researchers telephoned up to five of the nominated individuals in each organization, requalified them on the specified criteria, and invited them to participate in the study. Mostly fewer than five qualified respondents were available. In some organizations, only two suitable respondents were available, and in one organization, five people qualified. Everyone contacted agreed to participate.

Middle and senior managers from one government and four major private organizations in Sydney participated in this study. Participants came from the following industries: pharmaceuticals, engineering supplies, human resource consulting, local government, and equipment hire. Table I shows sample details including industry, gender (three women, 14 men), time since course completion, and length of course. The length of the SLII course attended varied from one to three days, during which all respondents had received 360-degree feedback. Respondents ranged in estimated age from late 20s to late 50s.

This convenience sample was not intended to be representative of the industries, or of SLII trainees or users, but to provide rich information about SL in practice. Such “intensity” sampling entails selecting “participants who are experiential experts and who are authorities about a particular experience”

Respondent	Gender	Months since SLII course	Length of course (days)
<i>Pharmaceuticals</i>			
1	M	24	3
2	F	12	3
<i>Engineering supplies</i>			
1	M	24	2
2	M	24	2
3	M	24	2
4	M	24	2
<i>Equipment hire</i>			
1	M	12	3
2	M	12	3
3	M	12	3
4	M	4	2
<i>Local government</i>			
1	M	24	2
2	M	36	2
<i>HR consultants</i>			
1	F	8	1.5
2	F	12	2
3	M	9	1
4	M	6	2
5	M	2	1

**Table I.**  
Respondent  
characteristics

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(Morse, 1994, p. 229) in order to obtain “information rich” data (Patton, 1990; Morse, 1994).

### *Procedure*

The objective of the interviews was to elicit a picture of how respondents use SL on the job, and to try to understand issues facing managers attempting to apply SL. Respondents were told by phone that they were to participate in a depth interview about how they apply SL at the workplace, as part of a study of Australian leadership. Prior to the interview, respondents were provided with a letter advising that: “The project aims at finding out how managers apply the situational leadership model in the workplace, or what prevents them from doing so. Research questions include: how managers use situational leadership at work, how effective they find the technique, under what circumstances it is implemented, what barriers to using the model might exist, and some of your successes with the model.” Participants were assured of anonymity in reporting the data, and that their participation was voluntary.

One of the authors conducted the 45-minute interviews by appointment in respondents’ offices between May 1999 and January 2000, with the timing at each participant’s convenience. Interviews were standardized using a detailed interview guide, but were conducted as free-flowing conversations. Extensive probing was undertaken and respondents were encouraged to relate stories to illustrate their answers. Topics covered nine main areas:

- (1) Confirming respondents’ recollection of the SL model and course attended.
- (2) Frequency of using SL, and whether this use is “conscious” or “unconscious”.
- (3) Which parts of the model are used, when does SL work and not work, ease of use.
- (4) Sharing the model with the team and others, management support.
- (5) Ease or difficulty of diagnosing follower developmental levels.
- (6) Enablers and disablers in applying the model.
- (7) Applications and usefulness of the model.
- (8) Flexibility and style preferences.
- (9) Comparison with other leadership/management models.

Although this study was primarily a qualitative study based on depth interviews, on three occasions respondents were invited to use scales to estimate the frequency of certain behaviors.

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed by an independent secretariat and two researchers independently read transcript data to identify a number of recurring themes emerging from the interviews. These themes then formed the basis of discussion between the researchers, resulting in

inter-subjective agreement as to the pre-eminence of specific themes. Since some themes did not coincide precisely with the topic areas used in the interview guide, the results are reported using slightly different categories in the next section.

Results

Main findings emerging from the interviews have been summarized into 12 broad qualitative theme categories, with frequency data shown in tabular form. Although the sample size did not permit formal investigation into age and gender differences, none were evident from these interviews.

Using the model

When asked how often they use SL in their work, respondents reported “average” to nearly “all the time”. On the ten-point scale provided, estimates ranged from 4 to 9 points (see Table II).

Table II also shows responses to whether SL was applied consciously, unconsciously, or both. Respondents were asked: “Do you use SL consciously? (i.e. you deliberately think about how to use it). Do you apply SL unconsciously? (i.e. it seems to come naturally to you, you don’t have to deliberately think about how to use it)”.

Respondent	Frequency of use <sup>a</sup>	Conscious/unconscious user
<i>Pharmaceuticals</i>		
1	5	Conscious
2	9	Unconscious
<i>Engineering supplies</i>		
1	5	Unconscious
2	5-6	Conscious
3	7-8	Unconscious
4	4	Unconscious
<i>Equipment hire</i>		
1	6-7	Conscious
2	6	Both
3	5	Both
4	5	Conscious
<i>Local government</i>		
1	5	Both
2	7-8	Unconscious
<i>HR consultants</i>		
1	6	Unconscious
2	8	Conscious
3	6-7	Unconscious
4	6	Unconscious
5	5-6	Conscious

Table II.  
Respondent usage  
of SL

Note: <sup>a</sup> Scale: 0 = never; 10 = always



Six respondents reported using SL consciously, eight said they applied SL unconsciously, and three claimed to use it both consciously and unconsciously. Those favoring unconscious use referred to the loss of time in deliberately sitting down and examining the model every time it was used, and also to SL's ease of use, which made it suitable for unconscious use.

SL was used consciously when "things were getting out of control . . . and then I may have to look at it or terminate the discussion", or with a new employee. One respondent described her conscious effort to say to a new employee: "you will find me to be quite directive in that first time you are out in the field . . . as time goes by you can expect me to pull back on that."

SL was mostly used in "managing" staff. However, probing revealed that "management" included a variety of more specific uses, including team development, performance appraisals, conflict resolution, initiating new staff and counselling. One respondent explained that counselling sessions invariably ended up "looking at the SL model to find out where they are now and where they want to be, where the gap is, and what style would help to get them where they want to go".

A respondent from the pharmaceutical company illustrated how SL helped where a staff member, who was a "highly advanced performer", was not performing in a new role. The manager was treating this person in an D3/D4 mode, but "they were really back at stage one . . . they were suffering and I noticed this frustration." After discussion with the employee, the manager realized that the person "needed some more direction", and arranged to have someone working by their side for a week or two until they got "up to scratch."

### *SLII appeals*

Overall respondents were enthusiastic about SL, claiming that it is a good tool – a not unexpected result, given the selection requirements of being trained in, and a user of, SLII. SL concepts appear to fit well with the managers' roles. In the words of several respondents:

- "If you look at the model, it probably fits pretty nicely with what our roles are . . .".
- "It felt as though I was more in control and certainly as though I was getting a better response from my team when I was using it . . .".
- "They really are like little pearls from heaven . . . I knew it was going to be as valuable as it was".

SL appeals to managers who like to work in a framework as well as those who prefer a more casual approach to their role. As one respondent, who had been using the model for 12 months, said: "it's black and white, it's non-emotive and it's able to classify people and situations". Another, from the equipment hire firm, said "you can use it with the fellows . . . and I know now when they're trying to play the game . . . you can adjust to where they are".

SL provides a way of expanding the management role and getting the most from staff. As one respondent recounted: “I think my problem in the past was that I wasn’t challenging my individuals who had experience and ability enough, and the less experienced people I wasn’t giving support to . . . so yeah . . . big message”.

SL appeared to be merely an extension of what some managers were already doing, and simply gave their previous management methods some structure. This helped make managers more confident in their roles. Some respondents, particularly those from the equipment hire and engineering supplies companies, had worked their way up to a management role and had, at one stage, been working “on the floor”. They reported feeling insecure about moving into management, and that SL provided a simple solution to what they had expected to be a complicated role.

*Favored styles*

As Table III shows, S1 (directing) was the least favored, and S3 (supporting) was overall the most favored, style. Against the trend, a manager from the HR company nominated both S1 (directing) and S4 (delegating) as most favored styles. When asked about a preferred style, the respondent replied, laughing, “probably not a style that I really want to acknowledge, but I tend to be either more directing or delegating, rather than coaching or supporting. So I have to try really hard to be the other two.” This reply reflects not only discomfort with directive and delegating styles, but some shame in not using the other styles as well.

From the question “Are there any of the styles that you find more difficult to use?” it became apparent that most respondents not only disliked using the directive style, but avoided it. One reason may be that Australian managers like to be seen as a member of the team and not set apart as the boss. As a respondent from the equipment hire firm said: “I hate having to stand there and say . . . like get forceful . . . I don’t like that sort of thing”. Another reported finding S1 (directing) “tiresome and boring”.

Some managers told of specific ways in which they avoided using S1. As a respondent from the local government sector put it: “I endeavor to employ people who seem as though they are competent, past the directing stage”. A manager from the equipment hire company said: “a lot of the work – the S1 stuff, I actually delegate that. When we get new employees in who are very . . .

**Table III.**  
Reported frequency of  
most and least favored  
styles

	None	S1/S4	S1	Favored styles		S3	S3/S4	S4
				S2	S2/S3			
Most favored	3	1		1	5	4	3	
Least favored	5		11				1	

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you know D1s, raw . . . I really don't have the time to go up there and S1 them. So I get guys like my equipment manager (to undertake the directing role) . . .”.

Although respondents had least and most favored styles, most reported that they can switch between the four styles when necessary. A respondent who had been using SL for two years, said: “Yeah, I prefer the coaching and supporting styles. But since the course, I've been more of a delegator”. Another manager, from the HR consulting firm, told us: “My comfort zone is coaching and my non-comfort zone is directing, but I'm having to use all four because it's required now”.

### *Simple and intuitive*

Reasons why SLII works included its simplicity, intuitive nature, relevance to the workplace, and that it matched “common sense”. Looking at each reason in turn provides some insight into SL's appeal:

- (1) Simplicity was illustrated in several ways. First, that the model can be depicted on a card and carried around was significant for a number of people. Some respondents even had a large “picture” of the model pinned up on the office wall:
  - “It's simple and it makes sense. It really is as cut and dried as that”.
  - “It's reasonably simple with a straightforward approach, it has a solid framework you can work with”.
- (2) The model is intuitive. Respondents commented that SL expands on what a manager instinctively knows, and structures this tacit knowledge to make it easier to use:
  - “It's being a little more analytic about what I was doing instead of just bumbling along by instinct”.
  - Another respondent, who uses the model “as much as I can”, explained that “I'd say I'd probably use it (the model) three or four times a week”. He commented that “it's pretty easy to just make a habit of it”.
- (3) Respondents find SL relevant to their roles, in their words:
  - “So I suppose if you look at the model it fits pretty nicely with what our roles are”.
  - “The whole program is particularly relevant to our role as sales managers having a variety of people in our team”.
- (4) Respondents found that the model was logical and made sense:
  - “I think it just clarifies situations and gives it logic, rather than emotive reasoning”.
  - “It pretty much just reiterates common sense”.

### *Time*

Respondents were divided on whether time influenced using SL. While for many respondents time was not a problem in implementing SL, for seven managers time was a problem. Reasons for this included that people are generally very busy – “time is always a barrier to everything we do around here, simply because generally there’s just so much to do so you can’t devote big slabs of time to it.” And “It gets harder to use in the office . . . it gets a bit hectic.” There were no complaints that the model itself was time consuming – the main difficulty was in finding time to revisit the model.

The ten respondents who said that time was not a problem believed that it was a matter of making time – “time’s not a factor for me because that’s my job . . . if I’m not managing my team and trying at all times to coach and develop them, and build their commitment and motivation . . . that’s all my job is really”. And “you need to make time . . . if you are managing and leading, that’s what you have to do”. Another said “it doesn’t require time . . . in fact it saves time”.

### *Easy to use*

SL was regarded as a good tool largely because of its ease of use, practicality and flexibility. It was easy to use, as all respondents pointed out, as well as easy to remember and effective. A possible shortcoming, identified by one respondent, was that SL did not work for those who could not communicate. A respondent from the local government sector, who had been exposed to SL in a previous job, acknowledged that he realized the model had been criticized for being too simplistic. He explained that “my only argument to that is, I don’t mind something being simplistic . . . at least you can implement it and run with it fairly quickly. Whereas if it’s so complicated on top of your already busy day, it will just be put aside.”

When asked “On a scale of 1-10, how hard was it for you to actually start using SL (0 is very easy, 5 is average and 10 is very hard)?”, respondents reported the model as variously easy and difficult to start using (see Figure 1). Only two respondents indicated that SL was harder than average to use. These two people said that they found the SL concepts initially hard to understand.

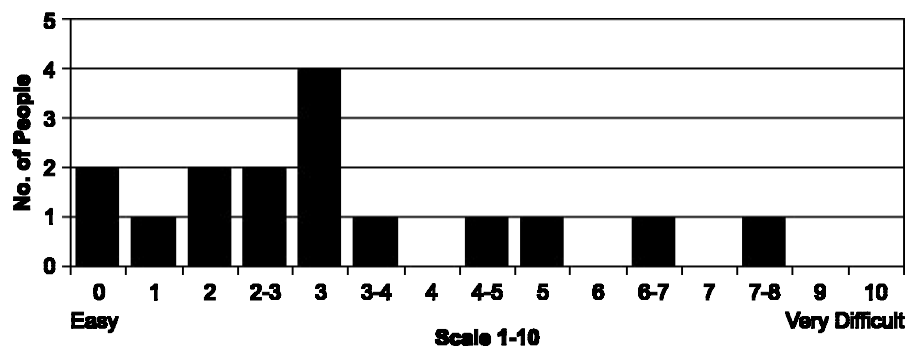


Figure 1.  
Reported difficulty of  
starting to use SLII

One explained that “working on it for the time we did, over the few days, I understood it pretty well”. This same person could not recall one instance in which SL did not work, although he preferred to use it to “build people rather than to . . . to . . . well, not regress people, but bring people back a stage”. The other said that “it’s quite a different way of thinking and it does require a bit of effort – it’s not an entry level leadership course”.

Respondents proposed two main suggestions for making SL easier to use: revisit it and apply it regularly:

- (1) *Revisit SL regularly.* Every respondent said that the model should be revisited regularly to make it more effective. Some organizations did actually provide internal revision sessions. Respondent comments included:

- “I think just having the revision helped”.
- “I think it is important to revisit it more than I have. Just to properly use it”.

The trainer for a revision program should have an idea of the level and nature of the managers in the course, “because some managers may prefer to have a lot of detail and others may prefer a nice, simple, straightforward approach . . . then you can pitch the training at different levels” on the revisit.

- (2) *Practice helps make SL easy to use.* One respondent recommending that SL should be used regularly, suggested that the “SL game” should be used more often. He proposed that managers should be given a set of scenarios as an assignment to work through every three months.

### *SL works*

Respondents were unanimous that SL works in practice. When specifically asked to provide examples where SL did not work, only one person could give an example, namely: “I’ve got an S2 in my team who I’m convinced will never be out of S2, and I’ve been trying to move him up into S3 and really struggling with that . . . I have to keep going back to coaching so that I can manage him effectively . . . I also have an S2 who thinks she’s an S3. She’s getting further into S3 but I am constantly monitoring my management style to achieve this.”

Respondents recounted examples of where SL had worked for them. In one case, an employee was constantly parking in the yard against the wishes of management – parking was scarce and was not to be used by employees. The manager explained that “I addressed the problem and got a huge negative response which I didn’t understand. What we had to do was explain to him – that is, I had to fall into an S1 position . . . I had to explain why I was being dictatorial on this issue. And by going through that process we came to an agreement.” This manager had only been using SL for 12 months and was impressed that “by one o’clock in the afternoon, everything was sweetness and light again”.

Another respondent related: "It wasn't until I had been managing for six months and things started going downhill that I decided I'd better revisit the notes. So I bought the Ken Blanchard books and read through them myself, and it made an enormous difference to the way I managed and the morale of the team – very impressive – it's great."

A manager in the equipment hire company explained, "I had some inexperienced people, and they needed to be in a coaching role. They were new to the sales team and I needed them to be a bit more responsive ... and I used the coaching role as me explaining to them ... how you might get a better response ... and once that was gained, then I could bring it back to more of a supportive role."

Another manager in the same company explained the situation of a person on his team "who likes to pull the chain a bit ... and ... I've changed the way of giving him the work he had to do. Instead of saying, well, can you go and do this for me, I've actually had to explain why it needed to be done, because otherwise this person felt that he shouldn't have to do it."

#### *No better tool*

Respondents were unanimous that they had not been exposed to a better management tool. However, it should be noted that most had not experienced many training sessions in other models – those who had, could not remember the details. This may indicate that SL is used more frequently because of its simplicity and ease of remembering. A manager from the HR company explained that the model was easy to remember because it "suits her style". Respondents also indicated that SL's ease of use was a significant factor in their opinion that there was no better management tool.

#### *Organizational support*

Overall, the managers interviewed felt that SL was a more effective tool when it became part of the culture of the organization. That all participants indicated receiving some organizational support for SL is not surprising, given that only managers trained in SLII were interviewed in companies that had provided training. However, ongoing organizational support varied in extent and form.

Two organizations seemed to have a supportive SL "culture", whereas other organizations sent their managers to the course, then left them to their own devices. Here, support depended on the branch respondents were in. One member of the engineering supply company explained "If you've done the course, you should know it all and use it. The support would be there if you asked for it. If you didn't ask for it you wouldn't get it – which is OK." Another from the same company said "the training people here were very keen to implement SL and – any opportunity – they encouraged us to implement the programs we had been on. It was management who gave full support to implement it."

The equipment hire company used SL as part of their culture. Everyone interviewed in the hire company commented on this fact, and the model was

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observed hanging in various parts of the organization's premises. Comments from respondents in this company included:

- "The whole organization is attuned to the principles ... it is quite a supportive organization in that regard. Then they let you practice things too".
- "Yes there is support – like hanging the model up to remind us ... they've got one in our hire centre as well ... and you get a reminder from your manager as well ... you know, how to coach and things like that ... it made things easier".

The HR firm also used SL as part of their culture, even incorporating it into performance reviews. In this firm, managers were required to diagnose commitment and competence, and include a scaled rating of each facet in performance review forms. A participant from this firm explained "I think the culture helps ... being a human resource services organization ... we should be good at leadership qualities." Another explained "The culture helps you with SL because, effectively, it treats you the way that you should be implementing the system".

#### *Others on the course*

All respondents indicated that it was useful having other people from their organization going to the SL course. Most were enthusiastic, although one person indicated that it was good at the time but did not make that much difference afterwards, because one never saw the attendees again anyway. Reasons why having others take the course was helpful included:

- *Networking*. You get to talk to people from other branches, "to talk to them about their problems and what problems you've got ..." and "it was good to compare stories".
- *Common language*. "If everyone knows what the story is, it makes it a lot easier to use it". Another explained, "if we all speak the same language it's a good positive, and when we get together as sales managers we often do small case studies of our own experience". A further comment was "I think it is easier when you encounter problems with staff that you've got some common ground to discuss those issues with other people".
- *Team bonding*. "If it is part of the culture, you feel part of the team", and "that bond you have with other managers who've done the course ... you can always speak to others for advice".
- *Helps understand the boss*. "I could now understand why he [my boss] would make me do certain things".
- *Reinforces commitment*. "The fact that a lot of the other managers in the office knew some of the SL terminology reinforces commitment ... it is great to have them in obvious attendance".

- *Embeds culture.* “I suppose over a couple of years it embeds a certain culture in the place”.

Where the SL terminology was generally understood and accepted by everyone in the group, respondents perceived that they had some support if they ran into a problem.

#### *SL for junior staff*

The majority of managers surveyed (10) indicated that SL training was appropriate for junior levels of staff for various reasons. One reason was that it helped junior staff understand the way they were being managed. “If you’re managing someone with that style, you should also probably have the people who are being managed under that system understanding it as well”. Second, junior staff could think in advance about which style of management will work for them. Further, junior managers would be better able to recognize their own developmental needs, and “we’d be able to have a two-way management style”. One person pointed out that SL was beneficial even outside work life, and therefore useful for people not in management roles.

Reasons given by those managers who thought SL was inappropriate for junior managers included:

- junior staff would not have opportunities to put SL into practice;
- SL was easier to understand if one had had some management experience; and
- junior people should learn other basic skills before leading people.

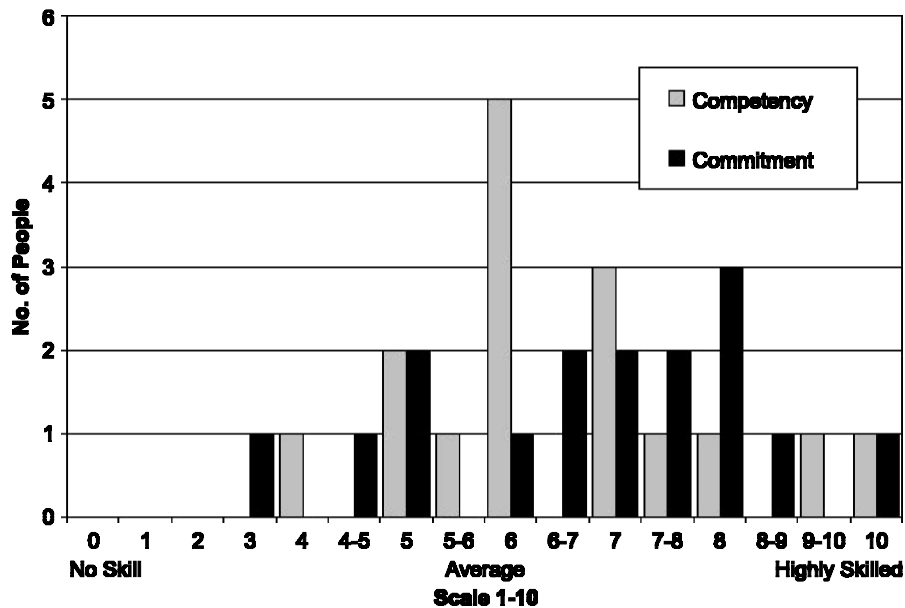
One person thought that a short introductory course for junior staff would be useful “just to illustrate to them what it is, and it would probably make them more receptive to some of the machinations of management”.

#### *Diagnosing*

We asked respondents how skilful they were in assessing their staff’s competence, using a scale of nil to 10, nil meaning not skilful and 10 meaning very skilful. Respondents also rated their skill at assessing their staff’s commitment using the same scale. Figure 2 reflects respondents’ self-assigned levels of skill for diagnosing commitment and competence, and shows that respondents mostly rated themselves as “average to highly skilled” on both variables. However, competency appears somewhat more difficult to assess than commitment, judging by the different modes shown in Figure 2.

No clear pattern in difficulty of assessing development levels emerged. Respondents who thought that competence was easier to diagnose generally, appeared to think so because the manager was also familiar with the particular job. One manager from the equipment hire firm explained: “I’d have to rate fairly highly there, because I’ve worked in the branch for two years . . . you work with them . . . and you can get a pretty good idea of where they’re up to speed. If they get anything wrong you tend to come across it.”





**Figure 2.**  
Self-ratings of skill in  
assessing competency  
and commitment

Another manager explained that commitment was more difficult to diagnose because “it fluctuates a lot . . . and I think it relates to the type of teams that some of us have. And young and female, which is the wrong thing to say but . . . yeah, I guess commitment fluctuates a lot.”

On the other hand, another manager in the equipment hire firm found commitment easier to diagnose because “there’s usually a fair indication of commitment, you know, in the hours people put in and in their commitment for going the extra mile for customers . . . and just helping each other out as part of the team”.

Another manager who had only completed the SL course four months ago, found that competence was more difficult to diagnose than commitment because “well, I’m still learning basically . . . I’m fairly new at the branch and I don’t know the . . . well I know the blokes fairly well, but . . . I reckon another couple of months and I should be up around the seven or an eight . . . because . . . it’s hard if you’re supposed to know the person”.

The equipment hire company respondents generally reported assessing development levels as easier than did respondents from other companies. This may have been because most of the equipment hire managers have “come up through the ranks”, and continued to work very closely with their staff. They were familiar with all the jobs and, therefore, found it easy to assess competence. They assessed commitment through their staff’s willingness to “go the extra mile for customers”, and by the questions they asked and “mistakes that had to be fixed up”.

An example of the successful use of development level assessment was provided by a manager from the HR firm. This manager explained the situation

with an employee who was “actually very confident at her job, but her motivation level is not high. And at the moment she seems to have a high need of approval from me. So I’ve had to give her performance feedback in a highly motivating way, and a much more constructive way.”

### **Discussion**

Respondents claim that SL is easy to use, effective and that they can think of no better management tool. While this enthusiasm may be partially attributable to respondents’ lack of experience with other tools, SL’s face validity matches common sense and intuitive management styles. SL also appeals because it is simple to use, and managers say that they feel more confident in their roles knowing about SL. These practical benefits may account for SL’s popularity among practicing managers. Certainly none of the respondents was concerned about the quality of the theoretical or research bases of SL, even though one respondent acknowledged external criticism of SL for being too simplistic.

It was hard to find examples where SL had not worked, but success stories were plentiful. SL is used for managing staff, as well as for a range of other management tasks such as counselling, team development, performance appraisals, conflict resolution, and initiating new staff. The SL developers had largely anticipated these broader applications (Hersey and Blanchard, 1988).

Organizational support for SL varies from those organizations with an identifiable SL culture and those who provided review sessions to maintain the culture, to those where management support for SL was available only upon request. Respondents reported that having organizational support facilitates the practice of SL, especially where an organization has adopted an “SL culture”. An SL culture can be created and strengthened by sending multiple staff members to training courses, thereby providing user support within the organization, encouraging networking, and reinforcing managers’ commitment to using SL. In an SL culture, members share a common language, team bonding is enhanced and commitment to SL can increase. Further, understanding between manager and followers is improved when followers understand SL, although the necessity for non-managerial staff to attend SL training was disputed.

Many of our expectations were confirmed. For example, like Australian managers untrained in SLII (Avery, 2001), the trained managers in this study preferred supportive styles, particularly S3 (supporting). From respondent comments, it was apparent that training in SLII had made managers aware of the need to be flexible and use all four styles, switching between styles as necessary. However, even these relatively experienced and trained users of SLII exercised preferences, generally being more comfortable with S2 and S3 styles. The predominance of supportive styles found in this and previous studies (Avery, 2001) is consistent with a preference for individualized consideration among Australian executives (Parry and Sarros, 1996). Increasing worker satisfaction and leadership “success” seems to require Australian managers to

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relate more individually to their followers, compared with their counterparts elsewhere (Parry and Sarros, 1996).

As expected, overall, respondents were least comfortable with S1 (directing). People described various techniques for avoiding S1, including delegating that uncomfortable responsibility, or trying to appoint experienced staff who would need minimum direction. This planned avoidance of S1 suggests that not only are respondents not applying the entire SL model, but that respondents who dislike directing may not be developing their people on new tasks. A focus on supportive styles could also be preventing managers from delegating effectively, and they may be investing more time and energy than required in overrelating to their staff, according to SLII. These findings raise questions about whether SL needs modifying for the Australian workplace, possibly paying more attention to developing skills in the underused styles.

Favoring supportive SL styles appears to be adaptive in the workplace generally (Goodson *et al.*, 1989; Cairns *et al.*, 1998). Goodson *et al.* (1989) propose that if at least one element of SL behavior were to be perceived as “best”, that element would involve high supportive behavior, as in SL’s supporting and coaching styles. Although the predominance of supporting and coaching styles might be attributable to Australian cultural preferences in the workplace, that these preferences persist after training in SL is of some concern. Of greater concern is the finding from other SLII research that Australian followers do not generally find their managers’ preferred supportive styles “effective” (Avery, 2001).

While SL was clearly regarded as being easy to use, we expected that managers could experience difficulty in “diagnosing” followers’ developmental levels, which tend to be loosely defined and somewhat overlapping (Blanchard *et al.*, 1985). Contrary to expectations, respondents did not report difficulties in assessing developmental levels, rating themselves mostly as average to highly skilled in diagnosing competence and commitment. Competence appears to be somewhat more challenging to assess in practice than commitment. However, familiarity with the job being assessed and dealing with the people being managed on a day-to-day basis appear to help managers diagnose developmental levels. It may well be that in general, knowledge of the job makes competence easier to measure, whereas knowing the person makes commitment easier to measure. Determining whether managers could more easily assess the extremes, i.e. the D1s and D4s, but have difficulty discriminating between the middle D2s and D3s was beyond the scope of this study.

Whether there is a relationship between supportive style preferences and skill in diagnosing development levels should be the subject of future research, since closer interpersonal relationships and more frequent interactions with followers may also be expected to aid diagnosis. Another possibility is that managers prefer to err on the side of supportive behavior when developmental levels are unclear.

Respondents reported that SL can be applied consciously, unconsciously or in combination. Given that practiced tasks become automatic compared with new tasks (Schneider and Shiffrin, 1977; Shiffrin and Schneider, 1977), we hypothesized that unconscious use of SL is likely to occur among more frequent users. The present results tend to support the hypothesis, although larger-scale research is clearly needed. Most respondents in this study were well practiced in using SL, with a fairly even split in using the model consciously and unconsciously. Respondents who said that they used SL consciously reported using it with average or slightly above-average frequency, whereas those using it unconsciously reported above-average use. Further research is indicated here to test this hypothesis because developing unconscious use of SL could help solve the problem that consciously applying the model costs managers time.

### **Conclusions**

This study has provided insights into how managers use SL in practice, particularly in the Australian workplace culture. We have seen that practicing managers proclaimed SL a valuable management tool, because it provides them with a framework for managing people; is relevant, useful, intuitive; and matches common sense. SL's popularity appears to derive from the model's simplicity, ease of use, and relevance to a manager's role. Organizational support for SL enhances the likelihood of the model's success, particularly where an organization has a culture supporting SL.

Australian managers' preferences for using primarily supportive styles have been confirmed among trained SL-users, even though the SL model emphasizes the importance of all four styles in a manager's repertoire in following the performance curve. Attempts to avoid using S1 by delegating directing tasks and managing D1 staff to others, or employing only "competent" people arose where managers felt uncomfortable with being directive. However, managers also often avoid D4, the delegating style. It could be fruitful to investigate the generality across cultures of these preferences. One could begin by analyzing data collected from administering the SLII instruments in different countries, if the models' developers were to make the information available to researchers.

Of particular interest is why Australian managers avoid being directing, and the extent to which managers in other cultures share this aversion. If this dislike of telling others what to do is anchored in the Australian culture, further cross-cultural research into how people apply SL would be valuable. These findings raise wider questions about the applicability for the Australian context of the US-based SL model, no matter how much it appeals to managers, if Australian managers do not use all four styles required to follow the performance curve. For practitioners, the results of cross-cultural research may indicate a need to adapt SL training programs to specific cultures, e.g. SL training may need to focus more on providing Australian managers with the additional skills needed to apply directing and delegating styles.

Surprisingly, the managers we interviewed expressed no great difficulty in diagnosing developmental levels, despite the seeming lack of theoretical and

operational clarity around these concepts, and the need for further research in this area. Given that our findings are based on managers' self-perceptions, it would be interesting to seek followers' perceptions of their managers' SL skills, especially as previous Australian studies have reported significant differences between manager and follower perceptions of SL preferences, behavior, and effectiveness (e.g. Avery, 2001).

The present study was limited in the number of people interviewed, and data were restricted to managers' self-reported behaviors. However, considerable consistency was observed across respondents, particularly in their positive attitudes to using SL on the job. Further research is needed to test a number of hypotheses generated by this qualitative study.

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